

Interviewer: Vanessa Huang
Interviewee: Nisha Purushotham
Category: Music
Genre: Percussion
Length in Time: 01:08:29

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VH: Okay, so this is November...

NP: —December

VH: —Oh my gosh!

(Laughter)

VH: December... The 17th?

NP: I think the 16th. Thursday, yeah.

VH: Thursday, December 16th, Reflections Café, Vanessa Huang interviewing...

NP: Nisha Purushotham.

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VH: Okay, so... Can we start by – can you tell me about growing up, where you grew up?

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NP: Sure. I was born in New Delhi, and my parents immigrated to this country when I was two years old. Actually my father came here the year that I was born, to study, and the intention was that they would just see whether this is where they would want to come to. We had other family members here, so eventually they did make the decision to take my brother and I here. And so I spent most of my childhood in East Hartford, Connecticut, and South Windsor, Connecticut, in first a somewhat diverse community, class-wise and race-wise, and then over time, as my father became more established here, my family went into more middle-class communities and predominately white communities, and so after living in Connecticut for part of my childhood, we moved to Massachusetts, and I spent the rest of my adolescence outside of Boston for a couple years and then outside of Worcester, and at that time when we were living outside of Worcester, I was living in a predominately working-class community that was not very racially diverse. So that's a little about some of the terrain that I was growing up in.

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VH: What did your dad do, and your mom?

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NP: My father, you know, after initially going through being, you know, janitor, and flipping burgers, and as he supported himself through school and supported the family through school, eventually went into financial accounting primarily, which was not at all his love, but kind of took that road in order to just kind of provide for the family and stayed in that realm throughout his working life. I mean he changed jobs a lot. When I was eight, he remarried – and, backing up, when I was four years old, my mother actually passed away, and so over time he connected with another woman of Italian – what is it? – Italian and Middle Eastern descent, but who was raised in the States. And so because of her job as a United Methodist pastor, we moved around a lot, so he changed positions, but for the most part was in financial accounting at that time.

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VH: Did you meet her family? What was it like growing up in a multi-racial family?

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NP: Yeah, we did – right from the beginning, we met up, and I think initially it was a bit of a struggle. More for her side of the family, because, not only the cultural difference, but my father is 16 years older than she is and she was inheriting, you know, two children, and was in her late 20s at the time, so it was taking on a whole new relationship within a family. So, but over time her family has really grown to love my father – who, I mean has been an amazing son in law, so... – and then really embrace my brother and I, and not, I mean, for my step-grandparents, that was kind of something they did for their daughter and it was not necessarily, you know, always understanding us in our fullest, that we were of a different ethnicity, and in certain ways, a different racial group. But with my stepmother I think there was a lot more sensitivity towards understanding that we have a mother, who I definitely feel like I'm very much – I've very much been in communion with her, over the years. And her spirit definitely guides a lot of what I do. So I think my stepmother was very aware that that is our mother, and that her role was to sort of be a support, and let us define how close the relationship would be. And it ended up that because she is, kind of a politically left-leaning, growing up in the 60s in this country

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NP: that I really began to relate to her quite closely. I mean initially it was because my friends had – a lot of my friends had close relationships with their moms and as a child I think I really yearned for that, a close relationship with a woman who was closer in age. So here's where the rambling begins, but – my two grandmothers actually came to this country to live with us after my mother passed away and so they were mother figures to me, and definitely key sources of not only discipline, but also imparting some aspects of tradition to me, but I still think that having a mother figure that was more contemporary, a 'friends' moms was important. So initially the relationship started to gel because of that, but then later on, as I became more, kind of politically conscious, which I would say happened in high school, to really, the seeds began to be taking root at that point. At that point I started to really relate to her because our worldview was starting

to connect, starting to mesh, starting to overlap. So, that's a little bit about the way that the two families came together. Oh! And one other – I think one of the losses that happened for my older brother and I through that remarriage was: my father, I mean as an adult now I have an understanding for this, which I think earlier, in my earlier adulthood, I was a little bit resentful of it. I'm 34 now and, so, talking about when I was in my early 20s. But my father was sensitive about

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NP: not marginalizing my stepmother in the family, and so that language, my family is Tamilian, which is a Southern, South Indian ethnicity, and there's a language called Tamil that we spoke at home occasionally, my grandmother on my mother's side used to speak it more than my grandmother on my father's side, and so I can understand it, but in terms of like that just regular interaction in Tamil, we've sort of just lost that, when my stepmother came into the family. And that's been, you know now in my travels to India, it's – it has been kind of, it's creating a chasm between me and a lot of people because that language now is not there.

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VH: You can drink. I'm sorry...

(Laughter)

NP: (Sips coffee) So...

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VH: I'm also interested in when your, when you started becoming politically conscious, also – well why don't we start with that?

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NP: Okay, yeah. I think – my family is Indian Christian, and I mean now, again, I have a lot of reflection on the ways in which being a fourth-generation Indian Christian puts up some barriers between me and the majority population in India and a lot of Indians that I meet here, as Hinduism kind of permeates our culture. But growing up, I think the aspects of Jesus' teachings about care for the marginalized, you know, to care for the poor, care for women, care for orphans – all of those things – I mean, that was, to a certain extent, the beginning of some of my political consciousness, that having that sense of awareness, compassion, and then moving into action, was there. And then in high school – I went to this school that was in an upper-middle class community that, but somewhat racially diverse and had a circle of friends where there were a number of Indian and other Asian young people. And so in my circle of friends I connected. And there, to a certain extent, we started to bond around being a racial and ethnic minority in a predominately white school. And in addition to that, there were upperclassmen who were getting involved in struggles around apartheid, and building some kind of solidarity coalitions here in the States. So that action at my high school really, kind of,

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NP: was a turning point because, you know, I was beginning to make a connection between, you know, seeing myself as an ethnic minority more, through that connection with my friends, but then, in terms of social action, like my consciousness was shifting from, you know, 'Let me be about community service,' and going to a soup kitchen and delivering food, or visiting the elderly – being very much in this service mentality – to, you know, 'There are structures that are unjust and perpetuate these kinds of oppressions and injustices,' and therefore, action that addresses the foundations of those structures is what is required, not just dealing with the symptoms. So I think that was a big turning point in my consciousness, getting involved with that action. And seeing young people as leaders of that, not only at my school, but then connecting with other high schools in the Boston area, and you know, I remember a demonstration that I went to that was really one of the first – if not the first – demonstrations that I'd been to, and really feeling that sense of community, of power, in that.

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VH: When was it?

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NP: That was probably in 85. 84 or 85.

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VH: And – I'm sorry, when were you born?

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NP: I was born in 1970.

VH: Okay.

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NP: Yeah, so I was 14, 15 at the time.

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VH: So did you continue organizing? What issues did you work on, or – what has changed over time?

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NP: Soon after that, my family moved to that working-class community outside of Worcester, and I went from having this circle of, of young people of color around me to being one of four people of color in a high school of maybe 300 students, and so—

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VH: Working-class white?

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NP: Yes—

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VH: Okay.

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NP: And so, and I think as a teenager I was so devastated by the separation from my friends that I really withdrew. So for the next – and then also I think life became this process of negotiating that position of being this really extreme ethnic minority and making attempts to try and connect with people, but facing, you know, marginalization and outright kind of, you know, racial slurs and things like that. So I really I think kind of withdrew into myself. But I think the, kind of the fire of political action was getting stoked in that process of withdrawal and kind of processing my anger, and sadness, and all of that. And when I went to college I became eventually an anthropology major, and had a mentor who had done a lot of study in Latin America, and looking at political economies, and how, basically through an examination of history and examining different economic changes, political changes, looking at the impact of colonialization on countries of Latin America. That really kind of built upon what I was experiencing in high school, and – but built upon it in a sense of giving me kind of the tools to analyze, get more specific in what are those pillars that kind of prop up these systems of oppression, and why is it that certain groups historically have been in that position. So I think that was really key, because before that, I was very much led by

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NP: just like an internal sense that this is unjust. And even with that political action around South Africa, and understanding that it's, it was a government-sanctioned thing, that the economic structures also perpetuated it. I didn't really have the tools to really break it apart, and I think in college that process started to happen through this mentorship. And definitely, by the time I graduated I was clear that I wanted to be involved in some sort of development work but in a very kind of nebulous – and I was clear then that I wanted to go overseas to be involved in that. And so I basically just applied for one program out of college – I had no other backup – but it was a program called the Mission Intern Program, through the United Methodist Church. And I really liked the principles of the program because it was a three year program; half the time you spent overseas and half the time in the States, in both cases working with any number of

organizations that fall under the heading of nonprofit, or political action groups, solidarity groups. And so the philosophy was that you're going overseas to learn from people in the Two-Thirds' World about how they address social injustice in, you know, various realms, around various issues. And then to bring that knowledge back to the States and try to – to the extent possible – use those, use that philosophy, use those kind of principles and strategies to address things here. So I went to India and actually worked with a project called Concern for Working Children, and was very lucky. Some of the other placement sites were not as comprehensive or well-organized. But this particular project had work going on in

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NP: the city of Bangalore as well as in one of the rural district areas outside of Bangalore and had this really comprehensive understanding of what are the causes of child labor and then to sort of go into work sites where children are working and just start pulling them out, under the, you know, understanding that this is an unjust practice, it is not addressing obviously the reasons why children are in the workplace in the first place, so through that internship which was very much about me just kind of like being a sponge and observing and learning and not, I mean contributing kind of very, very small things in terms of writing and working with their communications department. I really, it was like taking that knowledge from college, which was this, you know, tools for analysis, and it was like applying it to a very specific – not even applying it, but it was like seeing its application – in a Third, a Two-Thirds' World context. So I really, it really kind of made a lasting impact in terms of what is required to address certain issues and that seeing justice issues in a broader context, you can never isolate specific issues from one another and think that you address, again, talking about the root causes, can't address the root causes of things unless you see them in the larger context. So this project had like artisan collectives and other economic development initiatives that were going on in these rural district areas where a lot of children were migrating from because their families were needing them to work in order to have

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NP: economic means for their families. So – and it was very much kind of a participant-driven initiative where artisans and farmers, and other people who were of, other basically various mainstays of the economy in the rural area, workers within those sectors were kind of organizing together, and sharing resources, and finding ways to sustain themselves, given their different economic sectors. And it wasn't flawless, I mean it definitely was still a struggle, because the larger issues that were causing underdevelopment in those areas, so – and then in the cities they were actually organizing child laborers. The organization was started by a union organizer who was trying to organize workers in the informal sector, so – and she found that, when she called this one meeting of workers and various parts of the informal sector and it was mainly children who came to the meeting. So that was kind of the seed that led to the founding of the organization. So in the city they were organizing child workers to affect working conditions within their places of work and then also providing a training, healthcare, and basic literacy to a number of children at a shelter that was residential for a number of child workers but also just a place to go for those training experiences. So again, a long way of saying that that project was

very influential in helping me see, just if, how multi – if the issue is caused by, you know, a myriad of

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NP: reasons, then the strategy has to be, like multi-prong like that, and there has to be kind of a patience to build. I mean, I went there after 10 years of that organization being in, at work, so... And then when I came back, I went to North Carolina, to this county called Robertson County, which was a very poor rural county. Its population at that time was almost evenly distributed between African American, Native American, and European American, with a small but growing Asian population that was actually coming into the area.

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VH: Pan-Asian?

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NP: Yes. Yeah, and there I did work – I mean they had a history of doing work around various political issues because in that county, as recently as the 80s, they did not have racial representation in local government. The school system, like I think as late as the 70s or early 80s, was still segregated, so their initial work was around those things that, to a certain extent, people were taking for granted, I think, here, and to getting better representation in local government, desegregating the school systems, which, you know, because the different towns were so segregated, that worked to a certain extent, but that was a reflection of the way that populations were distributed among, you know, even the county. And there I started to work with youth, which I didn't think would be necessarily of interest to me, I feel like I'm a very old spirit, I just think that as a child I used to relate almost better to elders than I did to my peers, and so – and then in my adolescence, especially after we moved to that working-class community, I felt kind of awkward as a teenager and continued to feel that way in my early adulthood, like I really couldn't connect with people. So I was just sort of thrust into youth work and was not sure, you know, how that would be. But working with this other woman who was also placed there really worked within this African American community. Primarily working with youth, just around basic youth leadership training, and

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NP: relationship building, and how important that is, in you know, first initiating campaigns, you know, knowing one another, knowing your community, so doing some work with them around that, kind of mapping their local community, and then working with them to develop a regional training for youth, which they, we eventually did together, involving some other counties in that part of North Carolina. And then I also worked with teenage and young adult mothers around healthcare and improving this local healthcare system which was initially created to offer health services to low-income families, but what was found was that, you know, the treatment, and the processes, and the systems for actually providing that care were not culturally appropriate, or just flat-out racist, or, you know, people were, women that we met with felt like wholly disregarded,

disrespected by different providers, so it was on multiple levels that that system was not working, and so we – I mean that was part of a larger project: some of the organizers within this organization I worked with worked to organize women to be the leaders of that effort to provide that change. So, those were, I think by that point, the issues were more choosing me, saying, you know, ‘I want to work on childcare – I mean child labor – or I want to work with youth, or I want to...which I think now, in retrospect, was really good, because it, it gave me, without

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NP: me initiating it or controlling it, it gave me this look at a variety of issues, different populations, and, you know, again, even the organizations I worked with in the States, was attempting to address things more comprehensively, and very much starting from the power that people have within themselves and, in terms of their ideas for change, and also connecting with one another in building campaigns, so those were sort of key moments as well. (Sips coffee)

(Laughter)

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VH: I feel bad you haven’t had a chance to...

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NP: If this had been a meal, it would have been even more hideous because it would have just been an entire plate of food! (Sips coffee)

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VH: When did you – did you always play music? (Break in tape) When did you start getting interested in music?

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NP: I come from a very musical family, and so by the time I was seven, my paternal grandmother started teaching me piano. And so that was very informal, but she was my first music teacher. And then my father, who grew up in the Anglican church and sang in church choirs – and I think was very influenced by that style of music – really wanted, I think, my brothers and I, and second-brother at that point from my father’s second marriage, to learn like Western classical music. So we started studying, I think for me it was at age eight, with a teacher outside of the house, and trying to read music, and then I played clarinet in high school, and again, kind of learning more of a Western tradition. But throughout that whole time, there was this, you know, yearning to actually be a drummer. And for whatever – or, you know, reasons I know and reasons I don’t know, I just sort of like hid that. Although, I used to – it’s a big joke in the family now – we actually have like recordings of this, but I used to create these like makeshift drum sets up of like oatmeal containers and cereal boxes, and crates and things like that, set them up in my room, put on these headsets, and listen to, you know, pop music, and just

go to town! And then subjected my younger brother to, you know, like creating, you know, these like musical shows where we'd be doing these songs from like Sesame Street, with me, you know, providing the percussion. And I was the older sibling, but still, I was the one who was initiating these musical projects. So

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NP: so yes, I had that desire from a very young age, like at the time when in public school they started offering – or they did offer – those opportunities, I remember really wanting to pursue that. But I just felt like, my father's not going to allow it, it's not appropriate, I'm a girl, I mean, various things that just, I talked myself out of it. And, for a – in college I went abroad for a year, and during that time I was in England and one of the students that was abroad from another college from the States was an amazing percussionist, and so at that point, like periodically we'd get together and just jam on whatever we could find, because obviously we didn't have access to instruments there. So that was kind of reconnecting with that, and then in my late 20s, when I was, I continued organizing after I left North Carolina. Well not, it wasn't – there was a short break where I did some work with the Mission Intern Program as a trainer, training other people who came after me. But then I started organizing in Rhode Island with a project which still – it still exists, although I don't hear much it, as small as this state is – but it's a coalition of unions and churches, and other religious institutions that organize their membership around common issues, so it's trying to organize institutions around various issues, from jobs to healthcare, affordable housing, so I had worked with them for about four

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NP: years, and really, not doing much, I did a little bit of work with youth, but I was mainly working with churches where there was this really aging population and I think that was part of it, part of the reason why I was getting really burnt out, was because I was organizing people that I really didn't feel a hard connection with, so as I was getting burnt out, I, you know, a friend of mine, who knew that I did music, or had a history of music, just sort of said, 'Why don't you get something? Why don't you get some drums?' You know, even if it's just a hobby, even if it's just to unwind after work. So that was the reason I initially got congas – and he said, 'Get congas, because they're more affordable. You don't want to be lugging around a trap set everywhere.' So even that, I mean, kind of the issues in my early adulthood, kind of falling into whatever came my way. But that's how I initially started playing the congas. And I remember going, when I really kind of hit rock bottom. Oh! and also during this time I was going through this process of finally coming out, that – I mean I knew that I was gay from the time I was 12, if not before then, but I really was a closet case in the extreme way. Just, I mean in terms of my family's reaction to it, and obviously in terms of the larger community's reaction and wanting to be this person who pleased people, who, you know, was always agreeable. I just kind of really hid that, and by the time

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NP: I got into my late 20s, it was just like, you're going to kill your spirit, you know, your body will continue functioning, and you can go on kind of doing your thing, but you will have like a

very withered spirit if you continue that, living that lie. So, so when I – I think there was this connection between starting to play the drums and claiming that. What I feel now that it's a core part of my identity as a person who is claiming this other core part of my identity, and you know now that I'm so far into it – oh yes, how I got into the drums, yes. So once I started playing I then took this trip out to Colorado Springs. Again, when I had kind of reached rock bottom in terms of being burnt out as an organizer and being on that, being at that wall of, you know, an openly queer person, that wall being something I needed to break down, to actually live into that. So when I was out there, I actually sent the drums there and started playing. And there, really came into this understanding of wanting to change the nature of my work, wanting to have music be at the foundation of that – because of what was happening to me internally when I did drum. And at that point I think I had had a few lessons, but it was more just this kind of spiritual awakening as I was playing, and feeling that I, I mean it was feeling but it was also feeling like pulled towards shifting the nature of my work. And so when I came back, that's when I started delving into

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NP: what's now my work, this project called Rhythm and Roots, and being the sole staff person of that program, but...

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VH: So when did you go to Colorado Springs?

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NP: I went there in 98.

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VH: Okay, and then when did you move back here?

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NP: I – oh and actually that was just a visit, about a month-long visit—

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VH: Oh! Okay, okay—

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NP: But I think, you know, it was kind of like a much-needed retreat, and in that time and space from this area I really kind of came into that understanding. So it had been about a year of playing the instrument, at most. It may have been even less than that, that I started to feel this pull towards it.

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VH: And what made you start Rhythm and Roots – or maybe that was answered already?

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NP: There's, I mean, there are a couple other things to say about it. I think I realized, you know through my work and working with – it wasn't just working with older people, because, I mean, elders have a lot not only of wisdom to impart, but in terms of life experience and strategies for political work, I think they're an amazing resource. Now the older people that I was working with I felt like happened to be people who I felt like were sort of set in their ways of how to do certain things, and their ideas of what our work should focus on. I felt like in different places that their – I felt their vision to be still within this kind of capitalistic society of, 'What we want is for more people to have their own homes, a 9 to 5 job with health benefits,' and you know, I just felt like at a certain point, that that was where a lot of people's minds were at in terms of our political work. Now I don't think all organizing projects here are about that, but that happened to be who I was working most closely with. So I just really began to feel like I'd like to once again start working with young people, because I think where I want to be – and I think over time I've realized that this may be a strength of mine – is around questioning our cultural values that sort of govern our dominant culture and being about the work of transformation. And just, you know, I had a naïve idea

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NP: that young people would be more open to that. And yes, five, four or five years later, that's been confirmed, that there is more of an openness. I am sometimes disheartened by how much of the culture – that dominant culture, yeah – has molded or shaped especially high school age young people in what they want to move into. But still, it was a lot more open that what I was finding among late 40 year olds and older. So that was focusing with the younger population, more about cultural transformation and values. Rather than, 'Let's see how we can get more affordable housing in this one block.' I just felt like that is very important work, but that's not where my heart is, and that's not where my gifts are, as well, because I think we have to go, I have to go further than that. So that was a piece of it, and again, I – oh yes! Another shift that was happening to me was that I remember going to these actions where we would have like 400 people in the room and there would be one, like, government representative, or some institutional representative, and there would be these 400 people in the room asking for like, you know, a hundred thousand dollars, or asking for more li – more hours for the public library to be open. And you know, after five years of being like schooled in, you know, organizing and what is possible in terms of collective power, I

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NP: really found myself feeling like if this all we can get with 400 people in the room who are multi-racial, multi-class, who are, yeah – we're not anywhere, yeah. Because the focus is, we're still directing—

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VH: Demanding power back from the state?

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NP: Yeah, so – as though they’re the ones that have the power to give! I just felt like that was an assumption that very experienced and reflective organizers I know could break that – what I just said – down. They could say, ‘You’re not really understanding this in the fullness of it.’ But still, for me, I just felt like it was, there was this dis-ease about that and I began to, from my own experiences in playing music, and reclaiming being an artist, I began to see that my greatest sense of power comes when I’m sitting down to drum, or when I am creating an original piece of music. I mean, that that is when I am most in touch with possibilities, potential, thinking outside of the box – within myself. And so I really began to feel like, to be a part of circles or spaces where nurturing that in more people is really where I think there’s potential for a lot to – for cultural transformation to happen. If that’s the focus, that creative seed that we all have is where I want to start with myself, and then also nurture others who want to start there. So that was another focus of Rhythm and Roots. And then, by that point, I had started studying with a Dominican American who was basically schooling me in a lot of Afro-Caribbean rhythms and

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NP: you know, again, I think I never lost that idea that even if we’re unleashing that creative seed, understanding why certain groups of people – and obviously this affects everyone, but certain groups of people are marginalized political and economically – I mean, I never felt like there could be this complete ignoring of that piece of struggle. As I was learning Afro-Caribbean rhythms and learning some of the history of how that tradition was passed from generation to generation during the time of slavery, I was like, ‘Wow,’ you know. This – not only can I be helping to unleash this creative seed, but then doing that while sharing how people, in one of the most grotesque forms of oppression, were resisting through music, and through ritual, and through community building. So that whole piece started to really gel together with this other piece. So it was like the individual empowerment but then also placing that within the context of this tradition, and this history of resistance, and the survival of this music, and the creation of these instruments is a manifestation of resistance. But part of it – it wasn’t just resistance that’s focused on the oppressor, but it was also, ‘I will maintain my tradition and my ties with my people through this, through these art forms.’ And so that was

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NP: another piece that really kind of laid the foundation, another cornerstone for Rhythm and Roots. (Sips coffee) Yeah that’s right, you were feeling under the weather earlier this week. Is it coming—

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VH: I'm better, I'm better.

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NP: Good.

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VH: What were the other pieces?

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NP: The other pieces were that – especially in the neighborhood that I live in, it's just the Dominican population in Providence, and Puerto Rican, and Haitian, that I live in a community where that is part of the fabric of the local culture. And so – and again, it was another case of something coming to me without a whole lot of deliberance, but then it all started to make sense. That doing this work within, among young people who are of that descent could be really good for me, as well as them, in the sense that they then become part of the education for me in terms of this tradition. Like, as I try to create spaces where we talk about history, we talk about culture, and what has been passed down to you, it's also a way for me to be educated on that as someone who's not of that tradition. And that piece of it has been probably also the sticking point for me, that I think I always wrestle with. How much of this is appropriating another person's tradition and what, how far can I go in terms of trying to share this, not being a person who speaks Spanish, someone who has yet to go to the Caribbean? – which is part of the plan in the next few years, now that I have kind of the resources to do it. Yeah, just really treading carefully along that. But I think the way that

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NP: I have approached it is to not say, 'In Puerto Rico, they do this and they do this and they do this,' but more saying, kind of opening spaces where there can be dialogue and then kind of lifting up these ideas of, these themes of like, you know, the passing of tradition orally. 'What in your family, how in your lives does that happen?' Or, if you're talking about how Africans and their descendants were using rhythms to communicate without being – sort of a coded communication, 'What in your lives – how do we communicate in a coded way? When do we need to do that; why do we need to do it?' So it's more, kind of open, using those themes as a stepping stone for kind of reflecting on our own experience, rather than being this conduit of cultural tradition. So that's one of the ways that I negotiate that kind of, that real contradiction in what I'm doing. So that's been one and then also just dedication to connection, relationships with first generation people from those areas, and commitment to just constant study of the rhythms, of the history, through the means that my current, you know, situation allows. So that's been, that's definitely part of this history, is working with that, what's, what could be a real, like, stumbling block or

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NP: a real – something that could really jeopardize the whole purpose of what I'm doing. Those are some of the ways that I negotiate that. And there's one other piece that was... What were the other pieces that kind of fell into place? Oh yes! This idea of working with children who are either first generation themselves or second generation. And I think that's been another piece for me, as someone who grew up within contexts where it was hard for me to have tradition passed down. Not only as being a first generation immigrant, but also being an Indian Christian and somewhat, I mean, not in a lot of gatherings where not only Hindu rituals were performed but just Indians that were gathering together to be with one another. I just really felt as though – I still feel as though – there is a part of me that has never been kind of cultivated. And so part of this work is, you know, kind of watching young people not only struggle with that, but also make connections with one another around culture. Even if it's just that they're playing the beats together, that it's kind of being in spaces where that is happening. And just this ongoing process that I think has been a characteristic of my entire life, which is trying to build community across borders. That

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NP: more – I mean, now, more than ever before in my life, I have relationships with Indians that are, that have an aspect of cultural exchange going on. I now study tabla with a performer who is now based in New York. He used to be in Providence. And I study yoga with a woman from, actually from the same region my family is from, so now I'm getting these opportunities to sort of have Indians impart that tradition to me. But I still feel as though the reality of my life is that I want to be creating community where I am in a very authentic – in a very full sense, an authentic sense, and that, again, the, my intention is that this whole process of being a percussionist, and – I mean, my music extends beyond just Afro-Caribbean folkloric traditions, definitely – but I see it as kind of being a life-long journey, and a journey not only of becoming a stronger artist but of building relationships across borders, and so...(Sips coffee)

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VH: What else has shaped where you are now?

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NP: I think that, definitely being queer, has shaped me. That, something that I've shared with in one of the spaces where I work with young people is that I think that this identity, which is, you know, part of my core identity, is, it automatically causes, it has caused me to question categories, or to feel as though different experiences can – yeah, be categorized. So, for example, in the realm of sexuality, that there can be this idea of, 'These people are gay, these people are bisexual, these people are straight,' and understanding the world as just having those categories and then within those categories, that 'This person is the more feminine, that this person is the masculine one,' you know. I think that identity has helped me to see more of the world in spectrum, you know, that our experience is often always evolving, it's changing. And that the same person in a lifetime – in a relationship – can move from one place to another. So I think that has definitely shaped my awareness and applying that to other categories. For example, race. How that shifts depending on where you are in the country, where you are in the world, and

how the maintenance of those categories are, again, some of the founding pillars of certain systems of oppression that not only, it's not only an outgrowth

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NP: of those systems, but it's like required in order for those things to be propped up. And I also think, just the, as both a queer woman and an artist, I think, and yet being a person who grew up shy, grew up trying to not create waves and not draw too much attention to myself, I think being both of those things is kind of, it kind of sets in motion things that prevent me from kind of being complacent, or that it forces me to kind of enter into creative chaos, enter into experiences where I'm not in control. And I think as an organizer, as an educator, I am often, I often have to be careful about not trying to manipulate, like life becomes just this constant manipulation of the world in order to achieve maybe good ends, but I think as an artist I'm getting more and more moved by the idea of letting things flow, of you know, like if we had done this interview five years ago, I probably would have done like a five page reflection before we even met, you know, anticipating what you would ask and all of that. But, you know, it's more like, let – I think I'm more aware that honest

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NP: human action, interaction, allows for that. Allows for – what you ask impacts, you know, me, and then impacts what I say, and then it leads, I mean, a just more organic way of being, and letting go of the need to manipulate surroundings, and as a queer person, just you know, you automatically kind of give up, I think, control over your environment. I mean, whether it be your family, you cannot control how people are going to respond to you. In my workplace with young people, you just, it's forced me to sort of let go of that need to get people to like me or to respond to me in a certain way. But I feel like there's more honesty in my interaction with people when I let go of that stuff. So I think that's also shaped me. And to be, to really see creative chaos as a very powerful thing that's very much needed in the work of transformation and breaking out of structures that bind and keep us bound. That's kind of abstract, but... And there's a whole other piece about like the more and more realizing the control of sexuality and to what extent that is connected to a lot of these other systems of oppression,

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NP: whether it be based on gender, race, class – anything based on privilege – that's at work. And again, being this, you know, not living into certain expectations that the larger society has, like it helps me to see that more regularly and to challenge it within myself. Cause there's still a, you know, level of heterosexism within me, and so trying to conform, but I think it helps me to at least try to question that within myself more, so...

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VH: What does your brother do?

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NP: My older brother is a filmmaker, although – I shouldn't say although! I always have a disclaimer. Most filmmakers have to wait a long time before what they do gets public viewing, so yes, that's what he's kind of dedicated his time to, is a couple different documentary projects. And he's also a writer as well, writing short stories. And my younger brother is in journalism school in DC. Which you are, you're—

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VH: No...

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NP: Okay—

VH: Well, I'm learning—

NP: Okay. So there's a kind of artistic, I don't know...

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VH: Storytelling?

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NP: Yes, yes.

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VH: Okay, so can you tell me about your work at the Black Rep?

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NP: Sure, sure—

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VH: And what drew you to that—

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NP: What drew me to that was my partner.

(Laughter)

NP: So, she's the Education Coordinator there. But actually, that's not totally true, cause when I started to do Rhythm and Roots I interviewed a lot of different artists who I thought were trying to, who were using arts for cultural transformation. So I did interview Don King at that time, and thought at that time, if I can get my own work up and running, I would love to maybe do that here, it seems to fit the mission, some of the mission of the place. So, so that was there before Carissa came along. So, but there, what, part of what drew me was this, was the possibility of working with other artists. Because for the first

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NP: three years of my work, I've really worked primarily by myself. You know, going in and mainly focusing on the percussion aspect of it, the drumming technique, and traditional rhythms, but I think I've realized that one of the main themes of my work is this idea of interdependence, that in terms of a cultural value, that I feel like is really absent in the dominant culture here, it is this idea of remembering how interdependent we are, and that is manifested in these rhythms that we play, that have multiple parts, and we need all the parts to create the rhythm. But I was, it was just this contradiction that while I was kind of trying to create spaces of that with young people, in my own work, I was like, you know, 'I can handle it. I'll do the teaching, thank you.' Takes too much time to co-plan. So the Black Rep was a way of connecting with other very experienced artists, and then also mixing mediums. So one of the classes that I do, I do two classes with them. One is straight Afro-Caribbean drumming, and then also trying to create some original rhythms with young people. But then the other class is this drumming and theatre integration where this storyteller named Melodie Thompson, and she's an actor as well, she basically teaches basic skills in acting and then leads people through theatre exercises and we've both collaborated on doing a writing project around where people are from, and, because that project is supposed to focus on immigration, and so we started

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NP: with, you know, kind of this piece where young people who are involved are from, how they explain where they are from, not only geographically, but in terms of experience and people, so it turned in – while she was doing that I was kind of teaching, you know, some basic technique for the drums but also how can the drum be used as a storytelling voice. And, which has been great for me as well, because Melanie and I have since done a couple performances where I'm in that role with her. So it's, I think in a lot of what's happened with Rhythm and Roots, it's connected me with artists or it's connected me with experiences that have influenced the kind of work I do as an artist. So all of that is kind of what draws me to that work, is that possibility of collaborating more with other artists. I think the theatre kind of challenges me, pushes me, that as a musician, you can kind of, you can be like, you know, 'I'm expressing myself through the instrument,' but it kind of touches more around your presence and taking risks. Because in the theatre exercises that she does, I participate. So I think it's been great to have to be in that role of being led in a process, and taking risks along with young people, knowing what they go through when they're sitting in my circle, and being asked to do things that they weren't necessarily aware that they were going to do. So all of that has been a great aspect of that experience of working there, definitely. And having a performance venue, I mean in

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NP: some places where I teach, if it's in the school, if it's at CityArts, you know, we basically just perform right where we, you know, usually have the classes. There, you know, you're up on a stage, and just that, for young people to have that experience of really being seen as performers, has been another great aspect of working there, for sure. Have you been to the space?

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VH: I've only been in the immediate – I've never seen a performance, but that's definitely on my list!

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NP: There's a production coming up soon called Jar the Floor, which is—

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VH: Is that the one that runs through January?

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NP: Yes—

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VH: Shoot—

NP: It's highly recommended—

VH: I'm going to be in Oakland...

NP: Oh, okay. (Sips coffee)

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VH: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

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NP: I think that's pretty much, yeah, what I would...I don't think there's... Yeah, I mean I think the only other thing to add is that, again, as Rhythm and Roots has opened up some new relationships or experiences in me being a musician, I think I've also realized that while it is an important part of my expression – as a human being, as an artist – that where this all began, of seeing the power of my own creative seed, and potential there, and the unpredictability of it, that

more and more I'm coming back to the idea that if I am not finding expression for that, if I am not nurturing that within myself on a regular basis, if I'm not finding opportunities to compose and perform, that it weakens my ability to share that, to nurture that in others. And that there are certain things that, as an educator, I know, I think that I still suffer at times from being too didactic, but I really try to avoid, you know, that so there is this sort of, what I need to say, artistically, politically, spiritually, must be expressed through my own expression as a musician, that there are limits to what I can do – not limits to what I can do, but everything is not meant for expression within Rhythm and Roots so I think life has also become more of an effort to balance both expressions.

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NP: And that I don't think I could ever be an artist that was just performing and just composing, but at the same time, I know that I can't just be an artist educator. So both things are what allow me to be, in the fullness of who I am. So that would be the only thing I would add.

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VH: Great, thank you!

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NP: Thank you, that was a, that's an honor to be asked questions like that.

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